

At a recent Nebraska Breakfast, I stated that much of Washington's focus this year would be on these issues: the economy and jobs, the budget, and Iran. While our nation's serious economic challenges are no secret to any American, the gravity of developments in Iran are lesser known. As co-chairman of the Congressional Nuclear Security Caucus and a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, I must report that Iran's ominous nuclear ambitions are an escalating threat to international stability.

Recently, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presided over nationalistic ceremonies hailing advances in Iran's nuclear program, including new centrifuges capable of enriching uranium at faster rates and the insertion of the first domestically produced nuclear fuel rod into a nuclear reactor. Enriched uranium is a primary source of bomb-making fuel. U.S. State Department officials are considering this news mostly "hype," but I believe it is important to take this seriously as Iran's continuing march to nuclear development is a significant global security concern. Given the regime's apocalyptic threats toward Israel and harsh rhetoric against the West, addressing its nuclear ambitions has assumed a new level of importance for policymakers of responsible nations. The U.S. and Europe are taking this seriously; we need nations in Iran's backyard, like China, Russia, and India, to do the same.

As a signatory to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Iran has pledged to forego nuclear weapons capability. But last fall, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a report that concluded Iran was unambiguously engaged in activities related to the development of nuclear weapons. Some observers believe that Iran is less than a year away from the ability to develop a nuclear weapon. In 2009, the IAEA reported that Iran had enriched sufficient uranium to build a nuclear weapon. In a recent conversation, the IAEA director confirmed to me the difficulty of ruling out undisclosed weapons site activity.

Having rejected numerous diplomatic attempts to halt this activity, Iran is currently facing four sets of sanctions in the UN Security Council, which require it to suspend its uranium enrichment activities. In early January, the United States imposed sanctions on Iran's central bank and European Union (EU) foreign ministers agreed upon similar sanctions on January 23.

Russia, China and India, which each maintain significant commercial interests in and ties to Iran, continue to resist expansion of multilateral sanctions. China and India are major purchasers of Iranian oil. As the UN, US, and EU sanctions appear to be having an effect in Iranian society, the time is now for nations like these - who are seeking a more prominent role on the world stage - to pressure Iran's government to live up to its word on nuclear weapons

development.

This is a crucial moment. Rising unemployment and a strong youth dynamic factor heavily in Iranian society. With a new presidential election cycle beginning in Iran in 2013 and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2012, the issue of accountable governance, an overriding theme throughout the neighboring Arab world over the past year, will hopefully capture the attention of young Iranians. The Iranian people, particularly this new generation, deserve a more just and moderate form of government. As an aside, Iran has just given orders to execute a 34 year-old Christian pastor named Youcef Nadarkhani for the crime of witnessing to his faith.

Perhaps the time is ripe for change in Iran. If not, options narrow significantly. What is clear is that the responsible community of nations must act in unison to protect the very nature of civilization itself.

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